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Harper government's new national defence plan clear as mud

By Bob Bergen

The recent news that the Stephen Harper government plans to introduce new Canadian Forces territorial battalions to provide military assistance in domestic emergencies cries out for sorely needed transparency in military planning and defence spending.

The new territorial battalions to help deal with natural disasters or terrorist attacks would be established in Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Niagara-Windsor, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec City, Saint John, NB, Halifax and St. Johns, Nfld., by 2016.

2016? Really?

This seems to be part of an overall strategic slight-of-hand on the part of the Harper government which develops public policy that appears to be decisive, but which actually do little, if not nothing at all, to address the most serious issues or spell out its priorities.

The new territorial battalions of 100 regular troops and 400 or more reservists are an example of that.

There are already reserve units in most of those cities, which is fine as far as that goes because one might argue infrastructure and administration already exists which might provide a foundation for expansion, but 400 more reservists?

In the first instance, that more than doubles or even triples what's in place in most cities in terms of the related training, infrastructure and expanded administration required.

In the second, the inclusion of 100 regular troops in the territorial battalions raises even more questions.

Take Calgary, for example. Would the 100 regulars contemplated there be commanded and administered from Edmonton's super base? Stretching lines of command, control and communications in such a manner would be a straightforward military faux pas.

That was one of the reasons the Jean Chretien Liberal government ostensibly consolidated Calgary troops in Edmonton in the 1990s, to save money and to avoid such a stretch.

If that is not the plan, would a parallel new regular force administration infrastructure be set up in Calgary at increased costs? Where would they train? How would they get there?

The Chretien government sold off all its Calgary military housing in the 1990s. Where would those new soldiers live; in expensive new military housing or out in the market?

That's just Alberta. What about the additional new costs nation-wide?

Further, there doesn't seem to be anything in the new plans that addresses a serious vacuum in British Columbia caused by the short-sighted shutdown of CFB Chilliwack and the move of its 1 Combat Engineer Regiment to Edmonton, also in the 1990s.

The Canadian Forces opposed that move because they feared having the engineers separated from the B.C. interior and coast by a mountain range in the event of a catastrophic earthquake.

Just what might happen in that scenario is captured in apocryphal fashion in eminent Canadian historian Jack Granatstein's new book *Whose War Is It?*

It presents a terrifying reality that all Canadians would be well-advised to contemplate because it speaks volumes about the consequences of decades of short-sightedness on the part of governments of all stripes.

And, what Granatstein writes about is not a Chicken Little crying that the sky is falling.

Recent tremors recorded by scientists on Canada's west coast have sparked fears that a catastrophic earthquake could hit B.C. within two years so there is an urgency there that is based on science, not Granatstein's vivid imagination.

But, quite apart from that shortcoming and back to budget matters, the Harper government is talking about raising the CF annual budget to somewhere in the neighborhood of \$25-to-\$35 billion by 2011.

Here's where its slight of hand comes in.

The Conservatives back-ended the spending – to be fair just as their Liberal predecessors did – so that some \$5.3 billion will be spent over and above what the Liberals promised with the bulk of spending increases coming years down the road in 2009-2010 and 2010-2011.

But, will a Conservative government be around in 2011 to see that plan through?

Just ask former Conservative environment minister Rona Ambrose how her plan to reduce green house gas emissions between 45 and 65 per cent from 2003 levels by 2050 went over. She was laughed out of office.

In the meantime, in the past year alone, the government announced plans to spend \$3 billion to buy and maintain search and rescue aircraft, \$3.4 billion for C-17 strategic heavy-lift airplanes, \$4.9 billion for Hercules tactical transport aircraft, \$4.7 billion for Chinook helicopters, \$2.9 billion for support ships and \$1.2 billion for medium-sized logistics trucks.

It's all badly needed, but the question remains where that fits in with the annual budget process.

The Harper government is proud of its Accountability Act aimed, in part, at transparency to ensure federal contracts provide value for taxpayers' money.

But, it certainly hasn't provided the clarity needed to provide accountability in national defence spending.

One can only hope that budget transparency in the defence department isn't something it plans to leave to 2011, or even worse 2016, instead of March when the next budget is expected.

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